

John George Robertson (1803 – 1863)

In 1941 the Reverend Herman Montague Rucker Rupp, who spent his spare time studying the orchids of Australasia, wrote in *The Victorian Naturalist* that the National Herbarium of New South Wales contained a number of orchid specimens labelled "Herbarium of J G Robertson". The localities given were Wando Vale, Glenelg River, or Portland – all in southwestern Victoria. *Calochilus robertsonii*, named after J G Robertson, is one of three Australian bearded orchids that also occur in New Zealand. Who was Robertson?



Calochilus robertsonii

Calochilus (Greek *kalos* 'beautiful'; *cheilos* 'lip') is an Australian genus of terrestrial orchids, a few of which have spread to Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia and New Zealand. Most have hairy labella and are known as "beardies". *Calochilus robertsonii* is a slender to robust orchid with a single, erect channelled leaf and up to 15 flowers on its solitary stem up to 50 cm high. The flowers have greenish red petals and sepals with prominent reddish stripes, and a hairy red beard-like labellum with a hidden short, twisted hairless ribbon at the tip. There are prominent "eyes" at the bases of the column-wings. It prefers sunny places, often dry and bare areas under eucalyptus, or in geothermal ground, and flowers from November to December. It is common in Australia, but in New Zealand is confined to a few sites in the central North Island, where its survival is at risk.

John George Robertson was born in Glasgow on 15 October 1803, the son of William and Annie Robertson. He had spent two years as a botanist and naturalist with an Indian expedition before migrating to Australia in 1831, almost penniless. For the latter seven of the nine years he spent in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) he managed Formosa, the estate of botanist Robert William Lawrence. He knew Ronald Gunn, who had met Lawrence before his death in 1831 and was sending Tasmanian plant specimens to William Hooker at Kew. Encouraged by Gunn, John Robertson and other local naturalists were soon collecting for Hooker as well.

By 1840 Robertson had saved about £3,000. Due to the high price of land in Tasmania, he moved to Victoria, landing at Portland Bay with a valuable consignment of stock, and took up the Wando Vale pastoral run near Casterton. On several occasions Governor Latrobe was a guest at Wando Vale, the two men having mutual botanical interests. Robertson collected extensively on his property, and also in the southeast of South Australia. He maintained regular correspondence with Gunn and other botanists, and Gunn may also have visited Wando Vale, for the labels on Robertson's specimens at Sydney are in the same handwriting as those of Gunn's own herbarium there. The development of a garden at Wando Vale was early on Robertson's agenda, and a long list of plants supplied by a Launceston nurseryman in 1846 show that Robertson was an ardent grower as well as collector of plants. He and his wife, Mary McConachie from Coleraine, had no children.

In the mid-1850s Robertson sold Wando Vale and returned to England and Scotland, where he purchased Baronald, near Lanark. His personal collection of 4000 Victorian specimens was given to Sir William Jackson Hooker at Kew. George Bentham had access to it while preparing his *Flora Australiensis*; he mentioned Robertson frequently, and commemorated his botanical work in the names *Calochilus robertsonii* and *Ranunculus robertsonii*.

John George Robertson died at Baronald on 4 July 1863, aged 59 years. His widow returned to Australia and died at Balmoral, Victoria, on 18 June 1885, in her 74th year.